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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if young children recall stories with both male and female characters as well as they recall stories with only male or only female characters. The sample included boys and girls ages 3 to 5 from lower-class through upper-middle class backgrounds. It was hypothesized that boys would better recall stories with male characters and stories with both male and female characters than they would recall stories with female characters. The same outcome was hypothesized for the girls. It was further hypothesized that there would be no significant difference between the recall of stories with characters of the same sex and the recall of stories with both male and female characters. Three versions of four stories were told to 72 urban nursery-kindergarten students in mixed-sex classes. In one version of the stories all characters were male, in a second all were female, and in a third there were both male and female characters who participated equally in the action of the story. After telling each story to the class as a whole, children were individually asked six questions about the story. Results contradict the widespread belief that girls are interested in stories about boys but boys are not interested in stories about girls. Suggestions for further research are offered. (Author/RH)

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ABSTRACT

Title: Character-Gender in Children's Stories and Listening Recall

Statement of the Problem:

The purpose of this study was to determine if young children recall stories with both male and female characters as well as they recall same-sex stories and better than thay recall cross-sex stories. I hypothesized that both boys and girls would better recall same-sex and male-female stories than they would recall cross-sex stories and that there would be no significant difference between the recall of same-sex stories and the recall of male-female stories.

Procedure:

Three versions of four stories were told to classes of nursery-kindergarten students. The versions of each story were identical except for character-gender. In one version all characters were male, in a second all characters were female, and in a third there were both male and female characters who paeticipated equally in the action of the story. After telling each story to the class as a whole, children were individually asked six questions about the story. The number of correct answers were counted and analyzed by computing a t-test.

Results and Discussion:

Boys scored significantly higher with the male-female versions than with the female versions and significantly higher with the male-female versions than with the male versions. Girls' recall scores were also higher with the male-female version than with the other versions, though the difference became significant only in the second-half of the series of stories. Contrary to the widespread belief that girls are interested in stories about boys but boys are not interested in stories about girls, this study suggests that interest and performance may be maximized by using material which portrays both male and female characters who participate equally in the action of the stories. Suggestions are made for future research in this area.

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CHARACTER-GENDER IN CHILDREN'S STORIES AND LISTENING RECALL

by

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April 1982

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Chapter 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to determine if young children recall stories with both male and female characters as well as they recall same-sex stories and better than cross-sex stories.

In this study, recall is defined as the ability to correctly answer questions orally in a teacher-made test about what happened in the story which has been told to the child. Same-sex stories are defined as stories in which all the characters are of the same gender as the listener. Cross-sex stories are defined as stories in which all characters have the opposite gender as the listener.

I expected that stories including both male and female characters would be recalled as well as same-sex stories and better than cross-sex stories.

It is of considerable importance to teachers and those who produce books for children to know what sorts of stories interest young children. Reading performance, for example, has been shown to be related to the level of student interest in the reading material (Asher & Markell, 1974; Bernstein, 1955; Estes & Vaughn, 1973; Schnayer, 1968; Stanchfield, 1973; Whipple, 1963). One aspect of children's story interests which has been explored by researchers is the relationship between

the gender of the characters in a story and children's interest in the story. Some studies (Kujoth, 1970; Tibbetts, 1974) have suggested that girls are interested in stories about boys and traditionally "masculine" themes but boys dislike and avoid stories about girls and traditionally "feminine" themes. Such research indicated that if teachers desired the attention of the entire class, they had best use male-character, masculine-theme material. This idea reinforced the already-prevalent preference of editors and publishers for children's stories which feature male protagonists in traditional masculine roles (Hillman, 1976; Michigan Women's Commission, 1974; Nilsen, 1977; Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross, 1971; Women on Words and Images, 1972).

Research such as Kujoth's and Tibbets' has been challenged in several ways. Could children be interested in a story without liking it? Could their performance, such as listening recall, be higher with non-preferred, non-traditional-sex-role stories? Certainly the work of Jennings (1975) and Frasher and Frasher (1978) indicates that this is possible. Could the results found by Kujoth and Tibbets be caused by their poor portrayal of feminine themes? Studies by Zimet (1976) and Frasher (1977) suggest that neither boys nor girls identify with or are interested in stories about romance, submissiveness, and being good little girls--the stuff of "feminine" theme stories with girls in traditional roles. Potter's 1977 study further suggests that the relationship of performance and character-gender is quite complex.

There are two limitations, however, in all of the studies mentioned above. To begin with, they have used stories which differ not only in terms of character-gender but also in terms of plot and story theme. Hence, it is difficult to tell whether interest and performance measured in these studies is related to character-gender or to what the characters do. Second, these researchers have compared all-male stories with all-female stories but have not compared either of these with stories in which there are both male and female characters. (Potter included a "control" story with both males and females, but its plot was completely different from the other two stories in the study.)

I theorized that children have greatest interest in stories which include protagonists of their gender but that they do not need a story filled with same-sex characters for identification to take place: one character of the child's gender may suffice. I expected boys to recall stories with both male and female characters better than they would recall all-female stories but not significantly better than all-male stories. Similarly, I expected girls to recall stories with both male and female characters better than they would recall all-male stories but not significantly better than all-female stories.

These hypotheses were tested by telling three versions of four different stories to three similar classes of kindergarteners and three classes of younger nursery-school students. For each story one version had only male characters, one only female characters, and one version both male and female characters. After telling each story, each child in the class was asked to answer questions orally about what happened in the story.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Several studies have explored what the story interests of children are and how these interests correlate with performance in reading and listening. Rowland and Hill (1965) found, for example, that white children selected stories with white characters more often than black children did and that black children selected stories with black characters more often than white children did. Bernstein (1955), Schnayer (1968), Estes and Vaughn (1973) and Asher and Markell (1974) found greater reading comprehension with high-interest material than with low-interest material, although studies by Brooks (1972) and Scholtz (1975) did not find significant differences. Some of the effects of story-preference on performance may be cumulative over time. Whipple (1963) and Stanchfield (1973) found that reading achievement gains over a period of time were greater with high-interest material than with low-interest material.

Some studies have suggested that interest is greater with male-character stories than it is with female-character stories. Kujoth (1970) and Tibbets (1974) found that girls appeared to enjoy stories about boys and "masculine" themes such as sports, adventure, and conflict, but boys appeared to dislike and avoid stories about girls and "feminine" themes such as domesticity,

romance, being obedient, and nurturent maternal care.

Recently, however, some research has challenged the idea that male characters in traditional masculine roles will produce greatest interest among young children. Jennings (1975) found that while pre-school children said they preferred stories with traditional sex-roles, they had greater listening recall with stories about same-sex characters in non-traditional roles: boys best recalled details from a story about a male ballet dancer, and girls best recalled details from a story about a female letter-carrier. Frasher and Frasher (1978) found that both boys and girls had higher reading comprehension with stories which portrayed non-traditional roles than with stories portraying traditional sex-roles. Potter (1977) found, to her surprise, that problem-solving by both boys and girls was higher after stories featuring female problem-solvers (not a traditional role for girls or women in children's literature) than it was after stories featuring male problem-solvers.

There have been two factors in these studies which limit our reaching any conclusions about the relationship of character-gender and recall. First, they have involved more than one variable. The stories are not identical apart from the gender of the protagonists; a story about a heroic male, for example, may be compared with a story about a passive female. Children may simply prefer heroism to passivity rather than males over females. Second, these studies compare all-male stories with all-female stories but do not make any comparison with stories which include both male and female characters. Would the boys

studied by Kujoth and Tibbets have rejected stories about girls if there had also been boys in the stories?

To further explore the complexities of character-gender and listening recall, I used three versions of stories: one in which there were only male characters, one version in which there were only female characters, and one in which there were both male and female characters who participated equally in the action of the story. The versions differed only in terms of the sex of characters. I hypothesized that both boys and girls would better recall same-sex and male-female stories than they would recall cross-sex stories and that there would be no significant difference between the recall of same-sex stories and the recall of male-female stories. Thus, I expected that

1) Boys would have higher recall scores with male versions than with female versions,

2) Boys would have higher recall scores with male-female versions than with female versions,

3) There would not be significant difference between boys' scores on the male and male-female versions,

4) Girls would have higher recall scores with female versions than with male versions,

5) Girls would have higher recall scores with male-female versions than with male versions, and

6) There would not be a significant difference between girls' scores on female and male-female versions.

Chapter 3

PROCEDURE

1. The sample consisted of 72 urban nursery-kindergarten students in mixed-sex classes. The sample included boys and girls aged three to five of class backgrounds ranging from lower-class to upper-middle class.

A limitation of this study is its small sample siz and its restriction to urban children who are in a nursery-kindergarten. It is possible that different results might be obtained from a larger sample which included children from rural and suburban areas and children who were not in school from ages three to five. Another limitation is that the groups compared, though of the same grade-level, did not turn out to be of nearly identical age, due to individual differences in the classes at each grade level. The implications of the age-discrepancy will be discussed in the Discussion.

2. Techniques of Measurement

Listening recall was measured by individually asking each child six questions after each day's story, such as "Who gave the boy/girl the goldfish?", and then counting the number of correct answers. Since there were four stories used in this study, scores could range from zero to 24.

A serious limitation of this technique is its reliance on a teacher-made test for recall. It is difficult to tell whether

such teacher-made tests are valid and reliable.

The test does appear to have content validity, in that the expert judgment of the classroom teachers supported the general findings of the test as to who within a given class (where the children heard identical versions of the stories) had very high or very low recall ability. Five children scored so low and so consistently low that it appeared that they had difficulty with listening comprehension. (A child who scores three on Monday and zero on Tuesday probably was not interested in the story on Tuesday; a child who scores zero every day and makes wild guesses may have a hearing or comprehension problem.) Subsequent conversation with their classroom teachers revealed that two of these five children had previously-diagnosed hearing and speech problems. The other three have since been referred to a language and learning clinic for further diagnosis. An additional indication of this test's content validity can be found in the fact that the test indicated the difficulties one of these children was having with listening in group settings before her classroom teachers realized how serious her listening and comprehension problem was. Data from these five subjects and from children not fluent in English were not used in this study.

One indication of this test's reliability can be found by comparing each child's scores on odd-numbered

and even-numbered questions. The high level of internal-consistency reliability for this test indicates that the data are stable: administering the test during another time period would probably yield similar results.

3. Research Design

Three versions of each story were prepared. The versions differed only in character-gender: in one version all characters were male (the "M" version), in another all characters were female ("F"), and in a third version there were equal numbers of male and female characters ("M-F").

There is always the possibility of the results being contaminated by the "experimenter effect" in the form of the storyteller's greater enthusiasm for one version than for the others. Did my enthusiasm for the M-F versions lead me to tell them with more vitality?

I tried to control for this possibility in two ways. First, I consciously tried to deliver the versions equally well. Second, I choose stories in which the M-F version was not my favorite way of telling the story. In selecting stories (from my forthcoming collection Stories for the Children of Light), I decided to use only one story which was originally written as a male-female story. With the other three stories used in this study, I originally wrote--and for various reasons personally prefer--versions which have mostly-male casts. The male versions, as we shall see, did not fare well in this study.

To eliminate the possibility that some children might be for familiar with the stories than other children, which would obviously give them an advantage in answering questions and distort the data, original stories were used which were written by the experimenter and had not yet been published or told to any class used in this study.

The stories were told, one each day, to the whole class in a group by the experimenter. Stories were told in groups to approximate the conditions of normal classroom teaching and to prevent the results of interest or disinterest (such as attentiveness or squirming around) from being mitigated by one-to-one interaction with the experimenter. After the class heard a story, children were called individually to talk with the experimenter. Three warm-up questions were asked to ascertain whether or not the child could understand and answer questions in English (What is your name? How old are you? Did you like the story?). Each child was then asked six questions each day about what happened in the day's story.

Six classes were tested, three kindergarten classes and three "fours" classes. At each grade-level, one class heard four male versions, a second class heard four female versions, and the third class heard four male-female versions. All classes were tested at approximately the same time of day, about 9:30 A. M. A limitation of this study is that the testing environments were not identical. The class settings differed in terms of physical arrangement, noise level, and number of distractions. Surprisingly though, the class with the highest

recall scores, both for boys and girls, the M-F kindergarten class, was also the class which had the most distraction and interruption during the story-telling. As with the fact that most stories were written as male-versions originally, this limitation should actually strengthen our confidence in the high scores found with the male-female versions.

Next , the classes were not identical in terms of their familiarity with the experimenter prior to the study--I frequently see many children from the M kindergarten group during the course of the week and happen to see very few of the children from the F kindergarten group, but this does not appear to have greatly affected recall scores. The fours classes were uniformly unknown to me and yet scored along much the same patterns as the kindergarten classes.

Last, it is a possible limitation of this study that the groups may have not been identical in terms of listening ability and ability to formulate responses. There was no reliable, valid way to ascertain the similarity of the groups in this respect. It is important to note, however, that groups believed by their teachers and the school director to be similar in verbal development scored significantly differently in this study.

4) Analysis of Data

The data in this study were analyzed by computing a t-test.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

The first hypothesis was that boys would have higher recall scores with male versions than with female versions of the stories. The results concerning this hypothesis can be found in Table 1 below. The mean recall score for boys

Table 1

Comparison of Boys' Mean Recall Scores with Male and Female Versions

	N	M	SD	t	p
M	10	13.80	6.25	.13	
F	15	14.13	4.90		

hearing the male version was 13.80 and the mean recall score for boys hearing the female version was 14. 13. Contrary to my expectation, boys scored lower with the male version than with the female version, though the *t*-test result of only .13 indicates that the difference was not significant. This hypothesis was not supported.

The second hypothesis was that boys would have higher recall scores with the male-female versions than with the female versions. The results concerning this hypothesis can be found in Table 2 below. The mean recall scores for boys hearing the male-female

Table 2

Comparison of Boys' Mean Recall Scores with Male-Female and Female Versions

	N	M	SD	t	p
M-F	14	20.86	2.45	4.55	.01
F	15	14.13	4.90		

version was 20.86 and the mean recall score of boys hearing the female version was 14. 13. The t-test result of 4.55 indicates that the M-F scores were higher at the 99% level of confidence. The above hypothesis was supported.

The third hypothesis of this study was that there would not be a significant difference between the boys' scores with the male and male-female versions. The results concerning the third hypothesis can be found in Table 3 below. The mean recall

Table 3

Comparison of Boys' Mean Recall Scores with Male and Male-Female Versions

	N	M	SD	t	p
M	10	13.80	6.25	2.03	.05
M-F	14	20.86	2.45		

scores for boys hearing the male versions was 13.80 and the mean recall score for boys hearing the male-female version as 20.86. The t-test result of 2.03 indicates that the difference is significant. This means that the null hypothesis is not supported; the male-female scores were significantly higher at the 95% level of confidence.

The fourth hypothesis of this study was that girls would have significantly higher recall scores with female versions than with male versions. The results concerning this hypothesis can be found in Table 4 below. The mean recall score for girls

Table 4

Comparison of Girls' Mean Recall Scores with Female and Male Versions

	N	M	SD	t	p
F	11	16.09	5.57	.53	
M	12	14.92	4.36		

hearing the female version was 16.09 and the mean recall score for girls hearing the male version was 14.92. The t-test result of only .53 indicates, however, that we cannot have confidence in this difference. Hence, the fourth hypothesis was not supported.

The fifth hypothesis was that girls' recall scores would be higher with the male-female versions than with the male versions. The results concerning this hypothesis can be found below in Table 5. The mean recall score for girls hearing

Table 5

Comparison of Girls' Mean Recall Scores with Male-Female and Male Versions

	N	M	SD	t	p
M-F	10	17.30	3.07	1.43	
M	12	14.92	4.36		

the male-female versions was 17.30 and the mean recall score for girls hearing the male version was 14.92. The t-test result of 1.43 indicates, however, that the difference is not significant. The fifth hypothesis was not supported.

The sixth hypothesis of this study was that there would not be a significant difference between girls' scores with the female and male-female versions of the stories. The results concerning this hypothesis can be found in Table 6 below. The mean recall

Table 6

Comparison of Girls' Mean Recall Scores with Female and Male-Female Versions

	N	M	SD	t	p
F	11	16.09	5.57	.60	
M-F	10	17.30	3.07		

score of girls hearing the female version was 16.09, and the mean recall score of girls hearing the male-female version was 17.30. The t-test result of .60 indicates that the difference is not significant. This means that the null hypothesis was supported.

Therefore, the results from this study support the second and sixth hypotheses but not the others. As expected, boys had higher recall scores with male-female versions than with female versions. As expected, girls' recall scores were not significantly different with the female and male-female versions. Unexpectedly, boys scored significantly higher with the male-female versions than with the all-male versions. Girls' mean scores were also higher with the male-female versions than with the male or female versions, but the low t-test results indicate that we cannot have confidence in these differences.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that the relationship between performance and character-gender is more subtle and complex than I had imagined. The results do not support my earlier notions about how children identify with characters in stories. Contrary to my expectation, when stories are alike except for character-gender, there are no significant differences in how well all-male and all-female stories are recalled by girls and boys. Indeed, contrary to the widespread belief that girls are interested in stories about boys but boys are not interested in stories about girls, a notion supported by studies such as Kujoth's and Tibbets', both the boys and the girls in this study had higher mean scores with the female versions than the male versions, though the differences were not statistically significant. Just as Frasher and Frasher (1978) found higher comprehension with non-traditional-role stories, perhaps the female versions' portrayal of girls in active roles constituted a mild shock to children who have already been inundated with stories which portray few females and portray those they do portray primarily in passive roles.

The inclusion of male-female versions in my study also yielded results different from those of other studies using only single-sex stories. I had expected children to identify as

easily with a character in a male-female version as with a character in a same-sex version but I did not expect any performance scores to be higher with male-female versions than with same-sex versions. In fact, scores were higher with the male-female versions than with same-sex versions, even though, as noted above, one of the classes hearing the M-F versions suffered more distractions and interruptions during the story-telling than any other class did. While the male-female scores were significantly higher in this study only with the boys' scores, if the study had included more than four stories, I believe, the girls' scores would have also been significantly higher with the M-F versions than with the F versions. As Table 7 below indicates, the same-sex scores for both boys and girls tended to decline from the first two stories to the last two stories, while male-female scores tended to improve from the first half to the second half.

Table 7

Change in Scores from First-Half to Second-Half

	Version	#Increasing	#Same	#Decreasing
Boys:	M	2	0	6
	F	5	3	5
	M-F	5	3	4
Girls:	M	1	2	8
	F	0	0	8
	M-F	5	2	3

(Note: children who did not hear all stories or had an unusual gap in the story-sequence are not included in this table.)

This table also indicates that, contrary to the implications of Kujoth's and Tibbets' studies, boys maintained interest over

time at least as easily with female stories as they did with male stories.

Comparing the second-half scores for girls provides another indication that significant differences would be found between male-female and female versions if the study contained more stories. The mean second-half score for girls hearing the female version was 6.25, while the mean second-half score for girls hearing the male-female version was 8.90. The *t*-test result of 2.01 indicates that these scores are significantly different at the 95% level of confidence. To a surprising degree, recall improved over time with the groups hearing the male-female versions. This study could be further improved by using more stories in the series and examining changes in performance over time.

As mentioned above, the groups compared in this study did not turn out to have identical mean ages. The mean ages of girls hearing the M, F, and M-F versions were, respectively, 4.8 years, 4.9 years, and 4.6 years. As might be expected, older children in a given group tended to score higher than younger children. Yet the girls hearing the male-female versions scored higher than those hearing the female versions, even though they were younger. While the difference in mean scores was not significant in this study, repeating this study with groups more similar in age might yield significantly higher mean scores for girls hearing the male-female versions.

Why might the male-female version fare better than the single-sex versions? Perhaps a class listens best when all its members

feel included. Perhaps boys recall male-female stories better than male stories because girls squirm less when female characters are included in the story. Perhaps the novelty of egalitarian sex roles makes stories where males and females participate equally more interesting than male stories. Perhaps male-female stories more closely approximate the world in which children live.

I believe this study has implications for future research. Future research on character-gender should compare stories which are identical except for character-gender if it is really gender that is being investigated. Future research might well track performance over time, with more stories than were used in this study, in order to examine the cumulative effect of character-gender on performance. The investigation of character-gender should also include stories which have both male and female characters. Studying character-gender with only single-sex stories may distort our view of its relationship with performance.

I believe this study also has implications for teachers, parents, editors, book publishers, and all others who care about how well children listen, read, and learn. This study indicates that children do not prefer all-male stories over all-female stories. Nor did the children in this study prefer same-sex stories over cross-sex or both-gender stories. Teachers who seek to maximize class interest by relying heavily on male-only stories may in fact minimize interest and performance. This study suggests that a better strategy might be to use material

which features both males and females participating equally in the action of the stories. Relying on stories which primarily depict male characters in traditional roles may be a disservice to both boys and girls.

Further research might examine other aspects of children's diversity. Rowland and Hill (1965) found interest to be related to the race of the characters. Research might investigate whether material which includes characters of more than one ethnic group leads to greater interest and higher performance than does one-race material. Other research might see if portraying a variety of religious heritages, only-children as well as those with siblings, non-nuclear families as well nuclear families, handicapped people as well as non-handicapped, and similar dimensions of children's diversity has any relationship with interest and performance.

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